VOL. 31, NO. 1 JANUARY, 1956

MORTON ARBORETUM
JOY MORTON · FOUNDER
BULLETIN OF
POPULAR INFORMATION

LISLE, ILLINOIS

MIMOSA OR SILK TREE; CRAPE MYRTLE; AND THE ROYAL PAULOWNIA OR EMPRESS TREE

Three distinctive Asiatic trees commonly encountered in milder areas to the south, which never fail to arouse the curiosity and interest of horticulturally minded travelers from less temperate zones, are the feathery Mimosa or Silk Tree, the multiple stemmed, often shrubby Crape Myrtle and the taller, sturdy branched Paulownia or Empress Tree. All flowering plants of exotic attractiveness and singular beauty, they are essentially 'Southerners' lacking the necessary adaptability to cope with climatic extremes and requiring extra special treatment if they are to survive locally. A hardier strain of the Mimosa is now available, however, and both the Crape Myrtle and Paulownia have proved root hardy here in spite of the fact that their top growth kills to the ground regularly.

Of them all the Mimosa has the best chance of succeeding in the north, that is if one plants the hardier strain from Korea which the Arnold Arboretum introduced in 1918. Known as *Albizzia julibrissin* (Durazz.) *rosea* (Carr.) Mouillef, this variety is lower growing and more shrubby than the type and bears deeper colored rose pink flowers. The tree's Asiatic origin is not difficult to guess, its interesting flat-topped head and spreading branches giving it an oriental picturesqueness accentuated by twice compound foliage of extreme delicacy and grace. The fine textured leaflets of soft green are about half an inch in length, sickle shaped and one sided, the latter identifying earmark resulting from the unorthodox off center location of the midrib. Like certain other members of the Legume family, the foliage exhibits a peculiar sensitivity which causes the leaflets to fold together in pairs at night.

In the south the Mimosa blooming season is a long one, extending from late June to September. The multitudinous stamens, two inches or so in length, constitute the most conspicuous floral feature, occurring as they do in a variety of pinkish hues ranging from light yellowish pink to coral.

They are fragrant and clustered in round, stalked heads in the axils of the current season's growth. The flat seed pods following suggest Locust, until they mature and become twisted and curly.

The type species, which is hardy only as far north as Philadelphia, reaches an ultimate height of 30-35 feet, whereas the variety *"rosea"* seldom exceeds 15. Both are low headed and frequently multiple stemmed and appear most striking when used as specimens. Otherwise much of their distinction is lost.

Without perfect drainage and the benefit of a sunny, sheltered site it would be unwise to try even the Hardy Albizzia in the Chicago area. Arboretum plants usually reach four or five feet before the end of the growing season, but seldom mature the new wood soon enough to prevent its being killed back by premature cold. They have been flowering for several years. The nearest sizable Mimosa specimens we know of are in Champaign, some 140 miles south, though there may be others closer.

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The Southern counterpart of our Northern lilac is the lovely Crape Myrtle, *Lagerstroemia indica* (L.), widely planted tall shrub or small tree which brightens Southern summers with a profusion of plumy blossom in a color range approximating that of the lilac. There are pinks of every hue from light to coral, cherry red and rose and even variations in purple, lavender and white. Individual flowers have a most unusual appearance, one and one half inch diameter saucer shaped blooms with crinkled or fringed petals and numerous stamens. Borne as they are in terminal and axillary panicles, their mass effect further suggests lilac. The fruits are roundish woody capsules enclosing small flat seeds.

Crape Myrtle foliage resembles privet both in size, shape and texture, being oval, dark green and leathery. An interesting fact about its arrangement is that while predominately opposite, the leaves on the uppermost branches may be alternate. Handsome fall color in tones of burnished copper or orange terra cotta adds appreciable autumn interest.

Although never a large tree, the Crape Myrtle sometimes grows to 35 feet. But one more often encounters its shrubby aspect, vigorous bushes 15 to 18 feet tall, upright in habit with numerous trunks and a compact rounded head. The stems tend to become fluted or twisted with age imparting a distinctive character quite befitting a native of China. The thin, grayish brown bark with which the stems are clothed is also decorative, peeling to reveal a smoothly polished undersurface. Commonly and easily grown everywhere in the South Atlantic and Gulf States, the Crape Myrtle is reliably top hardy only as far north as Baltimore. Inasmuch as its roots have been found to survive much more rigorous climates with no more protection than is given roses, however, it is possible to grow it as a perennial hereabouts. The fact that it flowers on the new wood insures

summer blossom, on short stems to be sure, but none the less attractive in form and coloring. Known to be very long lived, one will find Crape Myrtle specimens of great age still persisting in old Southern gardens. Williamsburg, Virginia boasts many noteworthy examples.

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A catalpa with blue flowers! So it would seem when one first encounters a Royal Paulownia, Empress Tree or Blue Catalpa as *Paulownia tomentosa* (Thunb.) *Steud.* is sometimes called, in full bloom. Only the season (early spring, later in the north) belies the error, for everything else about this "International tree" is catalpa-like. A lusty grower, short and thick of trunk with coarse branches and a rounded head, it presents a striking appearance not only in blossom but during the winter months as well. It is then that the clusters of brown seed pods, oval in shape and about the size of pecans, stand out so conspicuously. The Paulownias remarkable reproductive power can be appreciated when it is learned that every pod contains approximately two thousand little winged seeds. This undoubtedly accounts for the tree's escape from cultivation, from southern New York and New Jersey south to Florida and in the Gulf states as far west as Texas. It is originally from China, having been introduced by the early settlers around 1834. A Dutch botanist is credited with the naming of the tree for a Russian Princess, Anna Paulownia.

Blue flowers being rare among trees, a blossoming Paulownia is obviously an object worthy of considerable attention. Borne terminally in foot long clusters the pyramidal inflorescences are composed of a number of fragrant two inch violet blue flowers resembling Foxgloves in appearance even to the gold flecking on the throat of the corollas. As the buds, formed the fall before, are often injured by late frost, Paulownia bloom is never a certainty in the north. This being true, Morton Arboretum plants will probably never reach flowering size.

By far the most conspicuous feature of the Empress Tree is its bold, coarse textured foliage which on new shoots sometimes attains a diameter of almost two feet. Six to twelve inches is the usual size of the heart shaped leaves whose darker coloring, more blunt tips and stouter petioles distinguish them from Catalpa. They cast a heavy shade.

In spite of winter protection all but a few Paulownias in the Arboretum collection kill back to the ground each year. They have always sent up new basal shoots in the spring, however, to regain a height of eight or ten feet before the growing season ends. Most promising are several 1944 seedlings from a Pennsylvania source, which have managed to retain three years top growth uninjured. At one time a twenty foot tree existed in Danville, Illinois and there have been unsubstantiated reports of an even taller one in the tri-cities area.

E. L. Kammerer

The largest Empress Tree, *Paulownia tomentosa* (Steud.) at the Morton Arboretum, an eleven year old seedling of Pennsylvania origin.

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PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY THE MORTON ARBORETUM, LISLE, ILLINOIS
SINGLE COPIES 10c — SUBSCRIPTION FEE $1.00 A YEAR — DOUBLE COPIES 20c